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AUTHOR Albone, Kenneth R.
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ABSTRACT

In higher education, there has been a return to the education of the student as the focal point instead of traditional research, with the emphasis on improving student learning by developing outcome goals and being able to assess them effectively. Some guidelines for a basic framework, such as those developed for a basic public speaking course at a Mid-Atlantic state institution, would include: (1) identifying an ability; (2) determining criteria; (3) assessment activities; (4) preparing students for assessment; and (5) preliminary evaluation. The assessment begins by noting the links between institutional goals and the objectives of the general education course under consideration. Focusing on outcomes assessment, it would provide rich data for evaluation of the effect of the course upon the student and the curriculum. The trend to view higher education as a learning environment for the student would be well served by such programs of assessment. (Contains 17 references.) (CR)

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PLANNING SINGLE COURSE ASSESSMENT WITHIN INSTITUTION GOALS FOR GENERAL EDUCATION

KENNETH R. ALBONE, PH.D.

Department of Communication Studies
Bozorth Hall
201 Mullica Hill Road
Rowan College of New Jersey
Glassboro, NJ 08028
609-256-4500 ext 3393
ALBONE@HEROES.ROWAN.EDU

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In higher education there is a trend toward outcomes assessment as one means of meeting the pressure for accountability with institutions of higher learning. One avenue of assessment is to examine courses individually within the context of institutional goals for general education. Since most courses have assessment activities, this allows for a minimum of effort yet can yield important data. This paper examines a college required Public Speaking course within such a framework for assessment.

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There has been a emphasis to return to the education of the student as the focal point in higher education instead of traditional research (Boyer & Hechinger, 1981). In the past a program needed only to hire faculty who were current in the field and possessed a research orientation. It was then assumed that the students in the program would be properly educated. Institutions where teaching was emphasized did not reward teaching per se, but included scholarship and other criteria for tenure and promotion. Now there is emphasis on improving student learning by developing outcome goals and being able to assess them effectively (Bok, 1986). Both faculty and students are now asked to develop their 'talents' and show improvement along a multidimensional framework derived from the needs and desires of individual institutions (Astin, 1985). Criteria have been developed for an outcome-based approach to educational quality (Bergquist & Armstrong, 1986). Recently, Kuh (1995) stressed the goal of student learning as the sum of the last decade or so of reports on higher education.

In view of these developments, this paper suggests guidelines to serve as a basic framework within which a specific research program of assessment could be developed. This framework would focus on student learning. Individual courses would serve as the focus of the assessment process. Such courses would be examined within the context of the institution's goals or mission statement. Bergquist & Armstrong's (1986) provide criteria that can serve as a general basis for such an assessment. Focus should be placed upon student learning rather than on the content of the course or its assignments. Specific outcome goals need to be developed and operationalized along a multidimensional scale. The assessment of the outcome goals needs to be effective (reliable and valid) and ongoing. The outcome goals should be based upon the needs and desires of the individual institution and its mission. The outcome goals and assessment should include both student and faculty development. The outcome goals should be sensitive to the society and the local community and its characteristics (cultural diversity, ethnic and racial mix, gender definitions, and lifestyle choices).

With the above serving as a basic guideline, a more specific set of institutional goals for general education is needed. One of the twelve principles for effective general education programs developed by the Association of American Colleges (1994) is the need to embody the institutional mission in general education. An institution may adopt goals similar to those developed at Alverno College (1992) where students must demonstrate competence in eight abilities: communication, analysis, problem-solving, valuing in decision-making, social interaction, taking global perspectives, effective citizenship, and aesthetic responsiveness. A process is then needed which would enable the assessment of individual courses within such institutional goals. An adaptation of Schulte and Loacker (1994) suggests five steps for such a process.

The first step is to identify a general education course in which there are skills congruent with institutional goals. The second step is to decide what criteria is needed in order for the student to demonstrate competency in the skills. General criteria for a course may include any of the criteria developed by Bergquist and Armstrong (1986) and adapted here. The course should address the needs and interests of specific populations of current or potential students. The course should address the problems, needs, and concerns of the community and society relevant to the course content and process. The course should be consistent in its stated intentions, in the faculty and students' experiences, and in the outcomes of the course. The course should be tailored to its own institution, taking into account the institution's unique history, mission, purpose, style, resources, and projected future. The intended outcomes of the course should be clearly defined and the achievement of the outcomes documented (this embodies other steps). The course should meet the needs of students and produce desirable changes in student intellectual, vocational, personal, ethical, and attitudinal arenas. The course should assess each learner's need and help him or her grow to maturity along cognitive, affective, ethical, moral, social, physical, and interpersonal dimensions. The third step is to determine the way in which assessment will take place. Here, assessment activities already taking place in a course may be utilized. The fourth step is to prepare the student for the assessment activity. By utilizing course activities, such preparation may be minimal or nonexistent. Informing the student that certain activities will be used within a broader context than the classroom may be beneficial (Schulte and Loacker, 1994). The fifth step is to perform a preliminary evaluation of the assessment activity, both before and after administration, to examine its reliability and validity.

At this point it would be useful to use a specific course at a specific institution to show how the five steps could be implemented. This paper examined a required general education public speaking course at a Mid-Atlantic State institution. Although the assessment has not been completed at this writing, it has progressed enough to allow examination of the above five steps as applied to a specific course.

Public Speaking at a Mid-atlantic State College

Step One - Identifying an Ability. Recently, the Public Speaking course has been approved as a General Education requirement for every graduate of a Mid-Atlantic College. The recognition for the need for all students to receive this skill, among others, is clear. The focused mission statement states that '... career preparation stresses the acquisition of special knowledge and skills that enable students to contribute to various vocational enterprises and professional activities." (The Strategic Plan, 1992). Oral communication is one of the skills necessary for such career preparation. Furthermore public

speaking links career preparation with liberal education, one of the strategic goals for curriculum issues and actions (Strategic Plan, p. 65). It does so because oral communication is expressive as well as instrumental, as stated in the School of Fine and Performing Arts (where the public speaking course is housed) Level III Strategic Planning Report (1992), "Liberal arts education is also career preparation, preparation that focuses not on narrow and specific technical training but on broader and over-arching skills, like oral and written expression...." Therefore Public Speaking has become a integral and essential part of the curriculum.

Step Two - Determining Criteria. Now a more specific set of criteria can be outlined regarding the Public Speaking course. Criteria may vary, but the following criteria would be appropriate for a high quality public speaking course. Verbal/nonverbal dimensions are one set of skills pertinent in a public speaking course. The course should be able to identify the degree to which students are willing to communicate in certain public situations as a means of developing their skills (McCroskey, 1992). Cognitive and affective components of speech instruction should be included as well as the behavioral component (Hopf and Ayres, 1992). The course should assess the effect of the student's perception of self in acting or reacting in life upon the communication effectiveness (Albone, 1979). Students should gain competence in interaction skills with the audience (Vangelisti and Daly, 1989).

Step Three - Assessment Activities. There are three clusters of skills which are identified in step two: willingness to communicate, presentational skills, and self-perception during the communicative event. There are two types of activities already performed in the Public Speaking class which can address each cluster. The first type of activity involves the students completing three pencil and paper instruments at the beginning and the end of the course: the Willingness to Communicate Scale (McCroskey, 1992), Communication Apprehension Scale (McCroskey, 1982), and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). The second type of activity involves the evaluation of actual speeches the students produce in class. Although instructors can require different types of speeches, they need to follow the basic skills course syllabus which states that an informative and persuasive speech be required of each student. These two speeches can form the basis for the assessment. The grades and written evaluations can indicate the level of competency achieved. Hence both cognitive-affective and behavioral dimensions can be assessed (Morreale and Brooks, 1994).

Step Four - Preparing the Students for Assessment. Since the speeches are an integral part of the course, little needs to be said to prepare the student. They tend to want to do well for the sake of a grade. The written instruments require some explanation to the students. This was accomplished by letters from the Department Head and the course instructor in charge of the assessment instruments. The letters indicated the value of

the scales for the students' instructors in teaching (the pretest) and for documenting changes (the posttest).

Step Five - Preliminary Evaluation. Data for the first round of evaluations have been collected but not analyzed, hence the evaluation of the assessments have yet to be done. It was only within the last year that such an assessment process was instituted. However, to note that such an evaluation will be done is not sufficient. The results must be made known to instructors so that improvements in the teaching/learning environment can take place. Revision of certain teaching practices to revisions in the course itself may be warranted.

Summary Comments. The assessment process begins by noting the links between institutional goals and the objectives of the general education course under consideration. Hence when the assessment of course objectives takes place, the assessment of institutional goals occurs simultaneously. Sometimes the mapping is more complex. For example, the course objectives may be linked to program or general education goals which in turn are linked to the institution wide mission statement. Nonetheless, the value of the mapping process is evident when assessment activities already in existence in courses can be used to evaluate institutional goals.

Implicit in the finished assessment is the need to review its impact on curricular change and student learning processes. Unless the data collected is utilized, it becomes mere a collection of data. An initiative to insure that the data is utilized appropriately is imperative.

CONCLUSION

This paper helps delineate the many ways in which a program of assessment for a single course can be developed within the framework of institutional goals. The assessment clearly focuses on outcomes assessment and would provide rich data for evaluation of the effect of the course upon the student and the curriculum. The trend to view higher education as a learning environment for the student would be well served by such programs of assessment.

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